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ABSTRACT

These papers concern the efforts of the U.S. Office of Education to eradicate "degree mills", that is, organizations that award degrees without requiring their students to meet educational standards for such degrees, standards that have been established and traditionally followed by reputable educational institutions. The rapid growth in degree mills and their negative effect on the American educational system are emphasized in light of persistent efforts to halt their advances. (MJM)

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POLLUTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Efforts of the U.S. Office of Education in Relation to Degree Mills

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The Office of Education once issued a list of degree mills in 1959-60. For approximately fifty years, a file had been maintained and augmented through numerous sources: Inquiries, domestic and foreign; advertisements in pulp and better magazines and newspapers; occasional cases prosecuted by the Federal Trade Commission or the Bureau of Deceptive Practices of the Post Office Department; investigations by individuals and nongovernmental agencies; and complaints from State agencies, voicing the opinion that the Office of Education should exercise leadership in eradicating the persistent low-grade infection afflicting higher education in the United States and undermining its reputation at home and abroad.

The 1870 annual report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education described the origin of the certification of academic credentials for overseas use, devised to distinguish valid degrees from those sold by fake enterprises. The earliest degree mill of record, Richmond College, Jefferson County, Ohio, was chartered in 1835. Dr. Walter Eells, in American Degrees, (1960) closes his chapter on "Spurious Degrees" as follows:

> . . . . it may be safely stated that no recognized American college or university grants degrees solely by correspondence. A degree from any of the numerous present or defunct degree mills has no academic value, receives no credit in the education world, or by examining boards for the different professions. It is harmful to the recipient, tending to discredit the professional and intellectual integrity of the holder if he attempts to make any use of it. One of the most unfortunate aspects of the matter is that often the holder of such a degree is a native of a foreign country, ambitious for

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> advancement, with a high opinion of American educational institutions, and ignorant of the fact that for his hard earned currency, he has secured only a counterfeit and not a bona fide degree. Every effort, for the good of American higher education, should be made to protect the integrity of American college degrees.

A fortuitious combination of events in early 1959 led to the decision that the one weapon available to the Office of Education under its original mission "to gather and disseminate information . . . and to promote the cause of education in the United States" was that of giving putlicity to the problem by issuing a list of degree mills with supporting documentation of their fraudulent activities. The American Council on Education had obtained resources and engaged a researcher to study the problem and report his findings. The chairman of a Congressional subcommittee on appropriations had interrupted the hearings to ask the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare about a news item reporting the existence of more than 100 diploma mills in the United States. The Barr-Mateo decision had paved the way for cabinet officers to speak with impunity on matters affecting the public adversely. A new Assistant Commissioner for Higher Education, upon learning that the American Council on Education was unwilling to publish the names of degree mills, was successful in persuading the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare to issue a list of degree mills at a press conference.

In October 1959, the Secretary in a press conference spoke of the evils of degree mills and promised to issue a list at a subsequent press conference. At the same conference he announced his charge to the Commissioner to compile and maintain a list of degree mills and to publish in the Education Directory, Part 3: Higher Education and Accredited Higher Institutions a

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warning to the public on the tactics of degree-mill operators. He requested the Division of Higher Education to prepare a list for release by April 1, 1960.

Responsibility for compiling the "list of alleged educational institutions whose activities are questionable because they purport to grant educational degrees without requiring the usual academic performance" was lodged with the same staff that had for a number of years maintained and expanded the "bogus" file. This file and the expertise developed by its holder were the primary source of the American Council on Education report American Degree Mills (1959). The staff, increased by several temporary employees, devised and mailed questionnaires to several hundred "degree-granting" enterprises drawn from the existing files and uncovered in current publications.

However, the DHEW General Counsel's office insisted that there must be evidence that the degree mill has actually conferred degrees without the usual requirements before it could be added to the list. Although estimates had run to more than 100 active degree mills, the list under restrictions imposed by the General Counsel's office totalled only 33. It was not possible in a period of eight weeks to obtain verified information from the much larger group. Some understandably, did not reply. A subsequent list, prepared at the request of Congresswoman Edith Green in 1965 and ignoring the evidentiary requirements of the General Counsel's office brought the total up to 70 such enterprises. Recent additions, including a dozen in a single state, raise the known total today to 86. We are not prepared to sustain a public statement concerning those not having been subjected to the exhaustive inquiry made of those on the original list.

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The degree-mill project as announced by the Secretary consisted of three parts: Compilation and publication of a list of degree mills, conferences with Federal agencies to explore Federal powers available to cope with evils inherent in degree-mill operations, and with religious leaders inasmuch as degree mills frequently award so-called religious degrees and a Special Notice to be carried in the Education Directory, Part 3: Higher Education and Accredited Higher Institutions warning the public against degree mills. The conferences were held, and cooperation was offered. It became evident, however, that legislation by the states — not the Federal Government — was the principal avenue through which activities of degree-mill operations could be eliminated. The Education Directory carried the Special Notice until 1969. The statement now is included in each edition of the relatively new Directory of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs.

Degree mills are flourishing in the United States today. And, inasmuch as the Office of Education is unable to publicize the names of specific degree mills, virtually the only direct tool left to the Office in this area is publication of the "Special Notice" in directories and other publications.

It must be emphasized that this Special Notice has been employed significantly by the Office of Education in at least two instances in 1970 against alleged degree mill operations. In both instances, John R. Proffitt, Director of the Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility Staff, representing the Office, presented testimony in Federal Trade Commission hearings against two alleged degree mills. Mr. Proffitt's testimony centered around the Special Notice,

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and the fact that the Notice represents the USOE policy position regarding the nature of degree mills. In both cases, the USOE position, and the testimony offered by its representative, were regarded as being highly supportive and significant by FTC lawyers.

The recent rapid growth in degree mills justifies the Office of Education in its traditional opposition to practices that damage the integrity of the American degree. In the same State most strongly urging the development of a system of extenal degrees, recipients of ersatz degrees "earned" in another state are plaguing state and local school officials for recognition of these degrees. One of the State officials telephoned the Office of Education in February 1971 to request the strongest statement which could be used concerning an enterprise whose operator had instituted a libel suit against the State official in the amount of $20,000,000. Allegedly, the "university" had grossed $875,000 during the previous year, netting $200,000 to its operator. The total "take" in this educational underworld apparently is astronomical. The damage to innocent parties, no doubt is equally devastating.

Attached is a copy of the Secretary's April 1960 press release concerning degree mills. Special attention should be called to the Secretary's statement on page 2 of the April 1960 release quoted herewith:

> . . . I wish to reemphasize the importance of understanding what a degree mill is. It is an organization that awards degrees without requiring its students to meet educational standards for such degrees established and traditionally followed by reputable educational institutions. A degree mill either receives fees from its so-called students on the basis of fraudulent misrepresentations, or it makes it

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> possible for the recipients of its degrees to perpetrate a fraud on the public.
>
> These degree mills, therefore, undermine the reputation of American education both at home and abroad and create hostility toward this country on the part of their overseas victims. It is likewise clear that they work an injustice on the individuals who are deceived by their claims.

During 1970 and 1971, the Office of Education became aware of an apparent upsurge in the activities of degree-mill type operations. As a result of a growing concern over these activities -- along with concerns generated by a range of unethical behavior exhibited by some postsecondary educational institutions -- Dr. Sidney P. Marland, Assistant Secretary for Education, and Chairman of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education, took action to appoint, in February 1974, a FICE Task Force on Educational Consumer Protection. This Task Force later was transferred into a Subcommittee of the Interagency Committee.

One of the important contributions of the FICE Subcommittee on Educational Consumer Protection has been to facilitate the award of a Federal grant of funds -- contributed jointly by the Department of Defense, Veterans Administration and Office of Education -- to the Education Commission of the States to develop model State legislation for the chartering of private degree granting institutions and the approval of postsecondary occupational schools. This model legislation was formally adopted by the Education Commission of the States on June 28, 1973. A primary purpose of the model legislation is to provide both a stimulus and guidelines to the States for the development of adequate mechanisms for the regulation of degree-granting enterprises.

Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility
Staff - Bureau of Postsecondary Education
USOE - March 1974

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POLLUTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Efforts of the U.S. Office of Education in Relation to Degree Mills

Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility Staff

Bureau of Postsecondary Education

U.S. Office of Education

March 1974

RELEASED AT CONCLUSION
OF NEWS CONFERENCE

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Statement
By
Arthur S. Flemming
Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare

Last October, I announced the beginning of a program to help combat the educational blight known as degree mills.

I said at the time that the Office of Education would compile and make public a list of alleged educational institutions whose activities are questionable because they purport to grant educational degrees without requiring the usual academic performance.

We have reached the point in compiling this information where a preliminary list can now be issued. This list, which is attached, represents the most current information available on the subject. The U.S. Office of Education obtained the information presented in this list from a number of sources but primarily by use of a questionnaire sent to the schools during the past 8 weeks. The schools themselves therefore provided us with much of the information which serves as the basis for this preliminary list.

The U.S. Commissioner of Education wished to be equipped with the information contained in this first list of degree mills before undertaking the two remaining parts of the program contained in my first announcement. With this information as a basis, he will now seek:

— A conference with representatives of the Departments of Justice and State, the Office of the Postmaster General, the Federal Trade Commission

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and appropriate non-governmental agencies, to reexamine whatever Federal powers are available to cope with the evils inherent in degree mill operations.

— A conference with religious leaders, inasmuch as degree mills frequently award so-called religious degrees.

In releasing this list today, I wish to reemphasize the importance of understanding what a degree mill is. It is an organization that awards degrees without requiring its students to meet educational standards for such degrees established and traditionally followed by reputable educational institutions. A degree mill either receives fees from its so-called students on the basis of fraudulent misrepresentations, or it makes it possible for the recipients of its degrees to perpetrate a fraud on the public.

These degree mills, therefore, undermine the reputation of American education both at home and abroad and create hostility toward this country on the part of their overseas victims. It is likewise clear that they work an injustice on the individuals who are deceived by their claims.

In compiling this list, we have considered three broad categories:

1. Degree mills currently operating.
2. Degree mills closed recently enough to constitute a problem through activities of their "alumni."
3. Degree mills established in the United States but now active exclusively abroad.

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The active degree mills about which this Department has information are currently operating in 9 States. They offer a variety of degrees at prices known to range from donations to $500. One degree mill accepts a "free will offering" as its price for any of 6 degrees. The facilities of degree mills in the attached list range from no buildings, laboratories, or volumes in the library, to 14 buildings, 3 laboratories and 10,000 library volumes of one school which recommends, but does not require, a year's residence. Our evidence indicates that 11 of these institutions are active abroad. Six have granted degrees in India, Pakistan, Taiwan, Lebanon, Iran, Germany, Hong Kong and the Union of South Africa.

I am not so optimistic as to believe that we have uncovered all degree mills since public attention was drawn to this situation some five months ago. Therefore, through the Office of Education, we will continue to make known the existence of degree mills whenever we find them operative. It is in the public interest for us to create a national and international awareness of the inadequacy and utter worthlessness of degree mills.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20202

Office of Education
Bureau of Postsecondary Education

DEGREE MILLS

In the United States no reputable institution of higher education confers degrees solely on the basis of correspondence study. The lax chartering laws in some States permit the existence of correspondence schools whose practices amount virtually to the sale of degrees. Such organizations are commonly referred to as degree mills, a degree mill being defined as an organization that awards degrees without requiring its students to meet educational standards for such degrees established and traditionally followed by reputable educational institutions. Most of these degree mills operate solely by mail. In many cases staffs and plants do not even exist.

Degree mills are a serious threat to American educational standards in several ways. They damage, by misunderstanding in the public mind, legitimate and reputable correspondence schools. They defraud those who honestly believe they have received recognition from a legitimate institution of higher education. They lower American prestige abroad by deceiving foreign students.

The Office of Education, in April 1960, issued a preliminary list of more than 30 organizations designated as degree mills. The initial list, which is attached hereto, consists of three classes of organizations: degree mills currently operating, degree mills assumed to be inactive,

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and degree mills originally established in the United States but active exclusively abroad. Evidence from several sources indicates a much larger number of degree mills than have been identified. As additional information on degree mills is obtained, the Office of Education will release it.

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Special Notice

IN THE UNITED STATES no reputable institution of higher education confers degrees solely on the basis of correspondence study. The lax chartering laws in some States permit the existence of correspondence schools whose practices amount virtually to the sale of degrees. Such organizations are commonly referred to as degree mills. The U.S. Office of Education defines a degree mill as "an organization that awards degrees without requiring courses of instruction that all reputable educational institutions require before conferring degrees." Most of these degree mills operate solely by mail. In many cases staffs and plants do not even exist.

Degree mills are a serious threat to American educational standards in several ways. First they damage, by misleading the public, the legitimate and reputable correspondence schools which are filling an important and necessary role by providing correspondence study in the areas of vocational and adult education. Correspondence courses are also offered by some colleges and universities. But legitimate correspondence schools do not award degrees, and colleges and universities do not award degrees on the basis of correspondence courses alone. Second, degree mills defraud those who honestly believe that they have received recognition from a legitimate institution of higher education. Third, they lower American prestige abroad by deceiving foreign students. They cause legitimate American baccalaureate degrees to be undervalued because of the confusion overseas between legitimate institutions of higher education in the United States and the degree mills.

In view of the inadequacy and utter worthlessness of degree mills and their disservice to American higher education, the U.S. Office of Education strongly urges the public to be on guard against organizations advertising degrees based solely on correspondence study. Caution should also be exercised in evaluating degrees and other credentials to ascertain whether or not they have been obtained from degree mills.